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Statement for the October 4 Hearing on Ordination of Women by David Gracie:

The arguments for the ordination of women with which I am familiar tend to be both secular and rational in their tone. In keeping with the spirit of the times, Christians are urged to stop denying participation in power and decision-making to women in the Church. It has been demonstrated over and over in every other field of endeavor that women function as well as men - so the argument runs. We have excellent women doctors, judges, what have you; therefore it is anachronistic and blindly prejudiced for the Church to prevent women from serving as priests and bishops.

The arguments against ordination have been irrational, in the sense that they spring up from deep emotional wells, and they tend to be clothed much more in the language of the tradition. The question, it is said, is not about equal rights in decision making at all, but rather about the important difference in the male and female roles in the cult. In Judaism and Christianity men have always been the priests: the father killed the Lamb for the Passover meal, the male priest offers Christ's sacrifice in the Mass. The reason for this is rooted in something God-given about the male and female roles in the universe. Mary is the Mother of God, a part which a man cannot play. But Abraham and Levi and Peter and Fr. Jones prepare and offer the sacrifice for the family of God. Women receive it at their hands. That is understood somehow to be part of the natural order of things, a natural order which is confirmed by Scripture, or so the opponents of the ordination of women believe.

I favor the ordination of women but I am afraid that our present debates may further divide us, head from heart, and I perceive that to be a dangerous condition. If we only deal at the level of the rational and refuse to deal with the heart's reasons we will be sowing trouble for ourselves in the future. Likewise if we win a vote at convention with arguments made outside or apart from the tradition, we will not be acting in a way which makes unity possible after the votes have been cast. These are inter-related matters. The Judaeo-Christian

tradition has tended to define sexual roles in religion in certain ways. As believers we have been shaped emotionally by these definitions. If I feel most integrated as a human being at the Mass and if at the Mass men and women always play certain roles, then I will come to make an internal connection between that "sexual order" and the satisfaction of my own needs for order and peace.

But what the New Testament always does is challenge our sense of order. Jesus' disciples pluck grain on the Sabbath. The Son of God associates with sinners. The examples of how he turns things upside down abound. Our tradition is essentially dynamic because it is rooted in the story of Christ. I think a real acquaintance with that story prevents us from making any final definitions of what is "natural" for men and women. Even St. Paul, for all his sexual bias, is led by the Spirit to say "there is neither male nor female" in Christ (Gal. 3:28). That is a measure of the power of the risen Christ that he could so pull and stretch Paul beyond what would be natural for him to say, or, rather, what any Jew of his day would consider to be "natural", namely, that women should keep quiet in church, be submissive, and so on. The verse about equality in Galatians comes in the course of Paul's polemic against the Judaizers. On the issues of whether Gentile Christians needed to be circumcised or whether Jewish Christians could eat at table with them, Paul was clearly led beyond where most of the Jerusalem church thought the bounds of order were located. Who led him into this new territory? In Ephesians 3, Paul tells us it was the Risen Christ.

I think it is fundamental to understand the Christian tradition as living, dynamic, and constantly forcing us to alter and expand our perspective. It begins with the Resurrection, a most unsettling event, a new creation in the very midst of the old. (It is worth noting that the Resurrection was first attested to by women, whose testimony, up to that time at least, didn't count for anything according to the Jews.) The meaning of the Resurrection is that all things are being made new. The old boundary lines do not apply: Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/female.

Let us think for a moment how that great insight of Gal. 3:28 has been received by the Church. For some time the first generation of Christians went on using scripture and tradition to limit the full membership of Greeks in the Body. But after Paul won that battle, which was the great battle of his life, the way was cleared for some startling changes. Christians did some things which seem to me to be far more revolutionary than ordaining women. They discarded the provisions of the Covenant God made with Noah (Gen. 9) which required that even Gentiles keep the dietary laws with respect to blood. Now that sounds rather odd to us, but to the Jews it was as natural as the rainbow which was that covenant's sign. And they went further still by amending the Ten Commandments to worship on the first instead of the divinely ordained seventh day. Unless we are ready to join the Seventh Day Adventists, we have to realize that our tradition is dynamic indeed and that basic changes were made in the behavior and outlook of Christians during the time that Gentiles were becoming fully equal to Jews in the Church.

For long centuries the implication of the Resurrection for the slavery question was not fully realized. Christians like William Wilberforce finally heard what God had intended us to hear from the beginning and they acted on it. Plenty of arguments for the perpetuation of slavery had been made from nature, the Bible and tradition. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in 1768 refused to support the Quaker Benezet in his work for abolition. SPG wrote to him: "(We) cannot condemn the practice of keeping slaves as unlawful, finding the contrary very plainly implied in the precepts given by the Apostles, both to masters and servants, which last were for the most part slaves." Thank God the Christians who really understood the message of the New Testament - not the letter but the Spirit which gives life - were able to prevail over such reasoning.

The good news about sexual equality began to be heard more clearly in the 19th century, too, but it is only today that the message is beginning to

penetrate many of our institutions. It is most important to be able to hear it as good news, as part of the Good News for all men and women. The heart must be convinced as well as the head. Then the emotional problems we will all experience, our psychic readjustment in what we regard as natural in our life together in the Church, will be manageable. We can experience our conflicting feelings as pains of growth if we regard the full incorporation of women in the Body of Christ as a challenge and an opportunity of renewal for us all.

Equality remains the issue. The rational argument that exclusion from the ordained ministry spells inequality for whatever group that is excluded must be heard. But it becomes more compelling when it is addressed to us as believers and when the full equality of women in the Church is seen as one more important implication of the Resurrection of Christ, into whose likeness we are all being changed "from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (2 Cor. 3:18)